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Rosa Mucignat

Perspective and Historical Knowledge: Magris, Sebald, and Pamuk

Abstract:

Since the Renaissance, perspective has been used as a metaphor to describe both the possibility of depicting reality objectively, and the fact that all representations are limited and subjective. The same ambivalence is carried over in the notion of historical perspective, which serves to articulate both relativist and realist arguments about our interpretations of the past. This article analyses the tension between these two positions, and the way this tension is constructed, and in part resolved, in visual terms in three recent narratives of place and memory: Magris' *Danube*, Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, and Pamuk's *Istanbul*.

A great deal of twentieth-century critical thought has been based on a pessimistic view of truth and rationality that achieved its classic expression in the denigration of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era. One of the main targets of what Martin Jay has called “antiocularcentric discourse” has been the idea that it is possible to achieve an objective, totalizing and rationalized view of the past. Historicism recognizes that any understanding we develop of the past is conditioned by our own particular historical situation. Post-structuralist theories raise a similar point by drawing attention to the role of discourses and systems of power in producing knowledge. Finally, deconstruction is even more radical in arguing that the objects of the past, as all other objects, have no stable meanings or identities. Yet the fact that we have no access to a stable past does not in itself imply that we must give up the possibility of objective knowledge. A powerful pragmatic answer to the modern form of skepticism exhibited, among others, by Hayden White, came from Arnaldo Momigliano: “As

we cannot do better than studying change from a changing point of view,” he wrote, “there is a point in doing it well” (67). Sound historical practice, and not some transcendental idea of truth, is the only defence against a debilitating relativism. The realization that no single point of view can embrace the complexity of a historical narrative should lead to a recalibration of perspective and not to its wholesale rejection. Momigliano here employs a visual metaphor that has become emblematic of the “scopic regime” of modernity: perspective and the attending concept of point of view. From its inception in the Italian Renaissance, perspective has stood both for the possibility of seeing the world as an objective whole and for the inevitable fact that we can only view things from a particular angle. The success of perspective as a cognitive metaphor has perhaps outstripped even its impact on the arts. Pervasive to the point of being commonplace, perspectival metaphors today might seem entirely naturalized and neutral. This article shows how three recent narratives of place and memory by Claudio Magris, W.G. Sebald, and Orhan Pamuk challenge and revise centuries-old association of vision with thought in response to the postmodern debate on historical hermeneutics.

Since antiquity, artists were well aware that faraway objects could be shown smaller than those nearer at hand to give an illusion of depth, but this principle was not applied systematically, following geometrical principles, until the Renaissance. Renaissance artists thought of perspective as a series of rules and techniques for constructing images, which, as Erwin Panofsky states, relied on “rather bold abstractions from reality.” This is because linear perspective assumes that we see “with a single and immobile eye,” and that a picture constructed in this way as an open window “can pass for an adequate reproduction of our optical image” (Panofsky, *Perspective* 29). Yet, as James Elkins has shown, the modern understanding of perspective privileges aspects of systematic ordering of space and realism of representation, obscuring the self-conscious constructedness and indifference to

geometrical precision of much Renaissance and later practice. In particular, Elkins draws attention to the “fossilization of perspective” since the sixteenth century, noting how its devaluation as an artistic practice made it more malleable to metaphorical use, particularly in the new philosophical discourse of subjectivity which posited vision as homologous to thought (217-60). Indeed, throughout the modern period, the central assumption about perspective was that “the science of geometrical optics corresponded in a real way to the central facts of the visual process” (Kemp 165). The rigorous application of the laws of perspective was taken to guarantee a truthful and coherent field of representation that could replicate and even improve our visual experience of nature. The “truth” of perspective, however, depended on an increasingly strict discipline for viewing that fixed the location, direction, and mobility of the gaze and used framing devices to cast an artificial grid or plane of delineation over the blur of light, shade, colors and curves of natural perception. Subsequently, linear perspective became so strongly identified with Enlightenment thought that it is still frequently taken as emblematic of the unrelenting rationalism and search for “clear and distinct” perceptions associated with Descartes’s epistemology. In his seminars on the gaze, Jacques Lacan famously linked fifteenth-century perspective to “the institution of a Cartesian subject, which is itself a sort of geometral point, a point of perspective” (86).¹ This view developed out of Panofsky’s argument that “the history of perspective may be understood...as a triumph of the distancing-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self” (*Perspective* 67-68). But while Panofsky continued to uphold humanist values of fact-finding and critical interpretation, post-structuralist thinkers have taken perspective as emblematic of the strategies of representation and subject-formation of Western modernity,

¹ Twentieth-century theories about “Cartesian perspectivism” have been strongly criticized from an art-historical point of view by Elkins and Lyle Massey in her study of anamorphosis.

which are in turn linked to the structures of patriarchy and colonial power. Rejected by postmodernist aesthetics and by the avant-gardes, the cognitive model of perspective made a perhaps unexpected comeback in more recent scholarship. According to Claudio Guillén, “the cry for ‘perspective’ often expresses, in fact, a desperate longing for order in a cluttered, helter-skelter world” (370). Fredric Jameson highlighted the emancipatory potential of perspectivalism in his call for a new “aesthetic of cognitive mapping...in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle” (54).

Clearly the issue is not just one of spatial orientation but also of social and personal identity, and how the subject makes sense of historical change. There are discordant views as to when perspectival metaphors entered the discourse of history. Panofsky argued that the Humanists’ awareness of the “historical distance” separating antiquity from the contemporary world is “comparable to the visual distance between the eye and the object” (“Classical Mythology” 274).² Thus, at the same time as perspective was developed to represent reality objectively, European culture also began to visualize the past as distinct from the present. But while it allowed for the specific characters of the past to emerge, historical distance also undercut the possibility of truly understanding it from the standpoint of the present. This is why Panofsky talks of a melancholic strain in Renaissance art and culture, which laments but ultimately relies on the distance between the present and the past. A different account of the “temporalization of perspective” places it in the wake of the French Revolution, when the fast-changing political reality forced historians to consider their position vis-à-vis events of the past, which had to be interpreted in light of new social and political circumstances as well as newly defined epistemological standards (Koselleck 139). The discovery of the past, even the very recent one, as “other” posed methodological challenges that were met by Romantic

² See also Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes*, 149.

historicism with an aspiration to “resurrect the past” and reconstruct the everyday life of past ages through imagination and narrative (Rigney 4). On the other hand, the historicist tradition inaugurated by Wilhelm von Humboldt professed that “historical truth is, as it were, rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance.”³ As Mark Salber Philips has noted, “since the late eighteenth century at least, Europeans have seen some form of distancing as bound up with historical knowledge. Yet the same condition of estrangement also produces a strong countercurrent, encouraging a widespread desire to recapture a feeling of historical intimacy and connected tradition” (2).

Whether it began in the Renaissance or after the French Revolution, the extension of the perspectival model to history has provided a set of metaphors that continue to guide our discussion today. Without implying a precise genealogy, this article puts forward a comparative analysis of perspectival metaphors in Claudio Magris’ *Danubio* (*Danube*, 1986); *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine Englische Wallfahrt* by W.G. Sebald (*The Rings of Saturn*, 1995); and Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003).⁴ These texts, I argue, react to the postmodern crisis of historical consciousness by discovering a new hermeneutic potential in the perspectival model, beyond the absolutism-relativism opposition. It is not unreasonable to surmise that Magris, Sebald and Pamuk are well aware of contemporary developments in history and theory. Both Magris and Sebald have had distinguished academic careers in German studies at a time when, under the influence of New Historicism and Foucauldian theory, questions of history and context were prominent in the field. Pamuk’s own critical

³ From von Humboldt’s 1821 lecture “On the Historian’s Task” (58). Hollander, Paul and Peters place the origins of the metaphor even later in the “visually-oriented” scholarship of Huizinga (2).

⁴ I shall refer to Magris’ original Italian and Sebald’s German, but, being ignorant of Turkish, I will rely on Maureen Freely’s translation of *Istanbul*.

works, including his 2009 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, frequently reflect on the dialectic of distance and proximity between author and the narrated world.⁵ All three writers raise questions about the accessibility of the past through textualizations and the distancing from real lived experience and suffering that this mediation might cause. Such reflections take the shape of stories about space and in particular about problems of scale and point of view in landscape painting and mapmaking. Their post-imperial fictions are grounded in specific geographies (respectively, the former Austro-Hungarian territories along the river Danube, the Suffolk coast, and the city of Istanbul). At the center of all three is a narrator figure closely resembling or explicitly identified with the author, who undertakes his journey in the slow, unhurried pace of a wanderer or pilgrim (as suggested by Sebald's original subtitle) through seemingly familiar landscapes, thickly overlaid with digressions on history, literature, art, personal reminiscences and the life of notable people associated with the place. Part memoirs, part cultural histories, part fiction, these hybrid narratives use the travelogue format to bring to the surface the traces of a traumatic past: the dissolution of the Austrian Empire and the rise of nationalism and Nazi-Fascism in *Danubio*; industrialization and the atrocities of colonialism in *Die Ringe des Saturn*; and the "catastrophic success" of the Kemalist revolution, which set out to erase the multicultural heritage of Ottoman Empire in *Istanbul*.⁶ Magris, Sebald and Pamuk test the limits of history as they travel across England, the Mitteleuropa and Turkey to explore the memories and ruins of the recent past, negotiating their perspective between distanced, rationalizing vision and contemplative immersion in the flux of history.

⁵ The lectures were published as *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* in 2010. On the impact of New Historicism on German studies see Holub.

⁶ "A catastrophic success" is how Geoffrey Lewis defined the Turkish language reform, which eliminated all Arabic grammatical features and introduced the Latin alphabet.

Claudio Magris is a professor of German, critic and writer living in Trieste. An expert on Austrian literature, Magris wrote *Danubio* as the exploration of a cultural space where different languages, ethnicities, and religions have coexisted for centuries.⁷ The narrative follows the course of Europe's longest river from its sources in Southern Germany through Austria, Hungary, Serbia, and Bulgaria, ending at its sprawling delta on the Romanian coast of the Black Sea. Clearly, the existence of the Danube as a physical reality is unquestionable, yet Magris is quietly dismissive of anything that presents itself as solid, whether it is national identity, language, history, or geography itself. Seen in a bird's-eye view or on a geographical map, the river has an identifiable beginning and an end, and can be grasped in its entirety. But looking closer, things are less clear-cut. Magris takes it upon himself to solve once and for all the centuries-old controversy over the site of the Danube's source, disputed between two small towns in the Black Forest: Donaueschingen, at the confluence of the Breg and the Brigach, and Furtwangen, where the Breg flows from. Surveying the area on foot, he makes the strange discovery that "l'acqua che irrorà il prato da cui sgorga la Breg viene da un tubo, piantato dritto nel terreno" (26; "the water that drenches the meadow in which rises the source of the Breg comes out of a pipe stuck upright in the earth," Creagh 27). Thus the river's mythical source would be neither the monumental fountain at Donaueschingen nor the spring at Furtwangen, but an anonymous pipe that draws off the melted snow from a farmyard a few meters uphill. The closer the point of view, the harder it is to pinpoint exactly the spot where water and earth separate and the river begins. The open space of the estuary is even less readable: in that mixture of land, river, and sea water "la foce non c'è, il Danubio non si vede, i rigagnoli fangosi tra le canne e le sabbie non è detto giungano da Furtwangen" (472; "there is no river-mouth, one does not see the Danube.

⁷ On Magris' "triestinità" and the literary heritage of the city see Pizzi 37-60. On the Danube region as a site of cultural hybridization see Marcel Cornis-Pope with Nikola Pektovic.

There is no assurance that the muddy creeks among the canebrakes and dunes come from Furtwangen,” Creagh 400). The river’s meandering flow defies systematic description and becomes the symbol of a reality irreducible to linguistic and epistemological structures.

The complex geography of central and Eastern Europe has often been imagined as a realm in between, where continents and civilizations mingle. As Michał Czorycki reminds us, “the motifs of ambiguity and confusion recurring in many depictions of the area set its presumed ‘formlessness’ against Western ‘solidity’ ” (78). Characteristically, Magris taps into this discourse of otherness and gives it a positive turn, praising the formlessness and disorder of Eastern Europe over the rigidity of the Western, particularly German, self-identity and worldview. The narrator of *Danube* pokes fun at Ernst Neweklowsky, an Austrian engineer who devoted his life to compiling an encyclopedic study of the Upper section of the Danube. For Magris, Neweklowsky embodies that aspect of the human mind which constantly strives to eliminate dissonance and achieve a total synthesis. The Engineer “è un epigono non indegno di Hegel o di Clausewitz, sa che il mondo esiste per essere ordinato e affinché i suoi dispersi dettagli siano connessi dal pensiero” (67; “is a not unworthy disciple of Hegel or Clausewitz: he knows that the world exists to be put in order, and so that its scattered details may be bound together by thought,” Creagh 60).

His search for order and comprehensiveness is shared in part by Magris’s own textual persona – he too likes to gather dates, names, facts, and citations, comparing and connecting all. Magris, however, is at least as interested in constructing a system as he is in exposing its faults. Indeed, any attempt to standardize is bound to generate exceptions, just as archives draw attention not only to what is there but also to what is left out. “Ogni esperienza è il risultato di un tenace metodo,” remarks Magris early on. “È nelle classificazioni che la vita rivela il suo struggente balenìo, nei protocolli che cercano di catalogarla e ne pongono in tal modo in evidenza l’irriducibile residuo di mistero e di incanto” (13; “Every experience is the

result of a stringent method...It is in classifications that life flashes through so tantalizingly, in the registers that attempt to catalogue it and in so doing expose its irreducible residuum of mystery and enchantment," 17). In a Kantian vein, Magris argues that there is no experience without theory, and that preformed ideas and hypotheses are the conditions without which nothing can appear. Yet a priori paradigms are to be valued not for their explicatory power but for their inevitable failure to hold the enthralling variety of life into a unified scheme. Our constantly frustrated desire to unify and order phenomena is more than an interpretive strategy or a cognitive bias: it is part of how we perceive reality itself.

Later the same concept is illustrated with a perspectival metaphor that, as might be expected, is Cartesian in character. The narrator and his travel companions visit Neuburg, the ancient capital of the Palatinate, where a young Descartes is said to have resided when the overall plan of his philosophy prodigiously appeared to him in three prophetic dreams.⁸ While his friends visit the town's Gymnasium, named after the illustrious visitor, the narrator falls behind and loses himself in contemplation of the beautiful Maddalena, one of the group. Her flawless silhouette, he observes, mirrors her inner qualities of goodness and kindness, proving that appearances can sometimes reveal the essence. He insists:

Il regno del visibile va misurato con squadra e compasso...Solo la precisa ricognizione del visibile permette di giungere ai suoi bordi e di rivolgere uno sguardo oltre quei confini...Anche quella luce e quel silenzio che giungono da una fonte nascosta, anche l'oltre e l'invisibile sono nitidi e geometrici, aborriscono la confusione indistinta. (109)

⁸ According to other sources Descartes was in nearby Ulm. For details see Sebba.

The kingdom of the visible should be measured with set-square and compass...Only the precise identification of what is visible enables us to reach its confines and direct our gaze beyond...Even that light and that silence from a hidden source, even the beyond and the invisible, are clear and geometrical, abhorring a blur. (Creagh 95)

The entry point into reality's mysterious depths must always be the surface, which we, as humans, are irresistibly drawn to analyze and reduce to a geometrical order. "Set-square and compass" are the tools of the perspective painter, who stands at a distance and measures the position of each object in a systematic way. But just as the process of indexing highlights missing items, so accurate perspectives encourage the viewer to peer beyond the visible and look for the light's "hidden source." Magris professes disdain for imprecision and deliberate vagueness, suggesting that even the most unfathomable phenomena for which we have but hazy terms (he talks of "destiny," "aura," "the invisible") demand the application of clear and distinct thinking.

This makes a striking contrast with Magris' own way of proceeding in *Danube*, whose loose structure juxtaposes thoughts, facts and anecdotes without any hierarchical or logical order, just as the Danube itself collects its waters from different sources, unconcerned with political and ethnic boundaries. Magris' geographical observations frequently call forth questions about collective memory and the shape of history. An exhibition on the Turkish siege of Vienna of 1683 leads the narrator to reflect on the meaning of his own journey for ideals of universalism. Does the flow of the Danube represent the interconnectedness of European nations, or is it a painful reminder of their inability to live together in peace? Magris is cautiously optimistic:

Passeggiando fra quei trofei di vittoria che sono anche relitti di un naufragio, il visitatore si sente figlio e erede di una storia unitaria nei suoi frammenti, pur dispersi come oggetti di un campo saccheggiato, di una storia fatta di croci e di mezzelune, di cordoni di cappuccini e di turbanti. (208)

Walking among these victory trophies, which are also the relics of a shipwreck, the visitor feels himself rather to be the son and heir of a history unified in its fragments, though these are scattered like objects in a pillaged encampment; a history composed of crescents as well as crosses, of Capuchin cords and of turbans. (Creagh 177)

Depending on the point of view, the ruined Turkish camp recreated in the Vienna exhibition represents the Austrians' victory or the Ottomans' defeat. At the moment when it is poised to vanish in fragments or become hostage to partisan views, this remote but still resonant event is reconstituted into a meaningful whole. In the rescued objects on show at the museum, Magris reads an alternative history that cannot be explained solely in terms of conflict but is recast as shared heritage of both Europeans and Turks. In such a vision, indebted to Ivo Andrić's bridge metaphor, the history of humanity is conceived of as a unified whole that subsumes ruins and triumphs under a superior universal scheme. Ten years on, faced with the disaster of the Balkan wars, Magris still refused to recant the "true fables" of supranational humanism, convinced that "the nationalist fever...does not own history and the future."⁹

But this is only one side of *Danubio*. Magris' narrative is energized by the tension between distance and proximity, analysis and synthesis, panoramic view and minute observation. Magris places himself at the tension point between Cartesian perspectivism and

⁹ "Nemmeno i furori nazionalistici...hanno davanti a sé la storia e l'avvenire", in "Il mondo nel falò di Sarajevo." *L'Unità*, 15 March 1996, p. 7.

a form of seeing that is sensitive to the fragmentariness and uncertainty of experience. Throughout the book, overconfidence in rationality and systematic thinking is associated with modern totalitarianism and its disasters, while tolerance for contradictions and ambiguities is a feature of what Magris calls “*spirito austriaco*” (89; “the Austrian spirit,” Creagh 78). The multi-ethnic, multilingual Habsburg Empire is presented as a precursor of postmodern transnational identities. In this idealized picture, the enemies of old Austria-Hungary are all forms of totalizing visions and fanatic beliefs, from Napoleon to Hegel, from Heidegger to National Socialism: “contro il totalitarismo ideologico la tradizione austriaca difende il dettaglio sensibile, il particolare vagabondo, la vita irriducibile al sistema” (91; “against ideological totalitarianism the Austrian tradition defends the tangible detail, the unique particular, that side of life which cannot be reduced to a system,” Creagh 80). Magris’ narrative is a eulogy of small-scale, close-range observations. What he calls the “Danubian civilization” is seen through multiple lenses: personal memories, impressions of travel, literary citations and references, oral testimonies and sites of memory.

Not even Vienna, the putative center of this Danubian world, receives an overall establishing shot; instead, it appears as a collection of odd fragments: a life-sized statue of the writer Peter Altenberg sitting at his regular table in the Café Central; Wittgenstein’s house, now the Embassy of Bulgaria, on the Kundmannngasse; a guard hunting wild rabbits on the grounds of the *Zentralfriedhof*. At the Landtmann coffeehouse, a friend of the narrator remembers hearing the literary critic György Lukács give a political speech there in 1952. Magris is struck by the absurdity of the situation – Lukács lecturing leisurely café patrons about the greatness of the USSR. He presents this as anecdotal evidence of the split between the modern and postmodern worldviews, which peculiarly he does not see succeeding one another in the expected chronological order:

Lukács è il pensatore moderno per eccellenza, che ragiona per categorie forti, inquadra il mondo in un sistema e instaura, al di sopra dei bisogni, dei fermi valori. Vienna è la città del post-moderno, nella quale la realtà cede alla propria rappresentazione e all'apparenza, le categorie forti si allentano, l'universale...si dissolve nell'effimero. (220)

Lukács is the modern thinker par excellence, he reasons in terms of strong categories, sees the world in terms of a system and establishes firm values over and above necessities. Vienna is the city of the post-modern, in which reality yields to the depiction of itself and of appearances, the strong categories weaken, and the universal...dissolves into the ephemeral. (Creagh, 188)

Vienna stubbornly refuses to keep up with modernity, and by being backwards it ends up being ahead of its time. This kind of temporal inversion is typical of what Magris understands as the postmodern mutation, which has abandoned ideas about linear history and stages of development dating back to the nineteenth century. Vienna represents the awareness that is both pre- and postmodern of the relativity of all experience, including time. Past, present and future no longer take up fixed positions on the timeline of history but are reshuffled according to the observer's subjective frame of reference. Generalising from Ernst Bloch's famous argument that not all people exist in the same "now," Magris observes that events which occurred hundreds of years ago (such as the Turkish siege) might be felt as relevant to current affairs, while more recent ones seem infinitely distant and forgotten (39).

Further along the river, we meet Lukács once more in his native Budapest, which Magris describes as "the most beautiful city on the Danube" (Creagh 261). There, the concept of contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous is explicated in more detail with an

architectural example. The palaces and avenues of modern Budapest are the legacy of a vast program of public works that began in the mid-nineteenth century, following the creation of the Dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Magris, writing in 1986 when Hungary was still part of the Eastern bloc, speaks of the contrast between the theatrical flair of the monuments in the old capital and the stagnant, provincial atmosphere that hangs over the whole of central Europe. Maybe Europe is over, and its cities are perhaps nothing but the archaeological sites of a bygone modernity. Still, this declining world enjoys a light-hearted ease that is denied to more successful nations:

Ogni erede asburgico è un vero uomo del futuro, perché ha imparato, prima di tanti altri, a vivere senza un futuro, nell'interruzione di ogni continuità storica, e cioè non a vivere ma a sopravvivere. Ma lungo questi splendidi boulevards e in un mondo così vitale e signorile, che non mostra la malinconia dei paesi dell'Est, anche la sopravvivenza è amabile e seducente, magnanima e forse, a tratti, quasi felice. (313)

Every heir of the Hapsburg era is a true man of the future, because he learnt, earlier than most others, to live without a future, in the absence of any historical continuity; and that is, not to live but to survive. But along these splendid boulevards, in a world as lively and elegant as this, a world which does not display the melancholy of the Eastern Bloc countries, even survival is charming and seductive, magnanimous and maybe, at times, almost happy. (Creagh, 266)

Living, as it were, a posthumous existence, the “Danubian civilization” has emancipated itself from the grand narratives of progress and mastery, and survives pleasantly enough through its own decline. Forsaking the epistemological imperatives of modernity for a more

comfortable stance of relativism looks like an attractive solution. Still, there is something paralysing in the self-satisfied withdrawal from history diagnosed by Magris. The atmosphere of nostalgia and inevitability smothers any sense of freedom and agency. Once the “set-square and compass” of Cartesian perspectivism have been discarded, there is nothing left to orient the subject and to help reconstruct space and time as a composite whole. Yet to argue that the representational codes of today are no longer endowed with the self-assurance of earlier moments of Western history is not necessarily to dismiss perspective and critical distance wholesale. The rich and elaborated narrative of *Danubio* represents Magris’ effort of mapping postmodern space in a way that neither gives in to the notion that reality is unknowable nor falls back to old ideas of transparency and mimesis. Instead, Magris proposes an updated, if not new, perspectival aesthetics that articulates the relationship of individuals to the totality in which they find themselves, and mediates a comprehensive understanding of history as made up of catastrophes and progress all together.

European history, tragedy and survival are also at the center of W.G. Sebald’s work, although the levity of Magris’ narrative voice is replaced by a more somber tone. *Die Ringe des Saturn* has been described as Sebald’s most critical engagement with modernity and its modes of knowledge. J.J. Lang notes that “the walking body and its performances constitute...the locus of resistance to modernity” in this text, which stages a contrast between the inadequacy of maps and other forms of representation compared to the embodied experience of place (133). Like *Danube*, it is an exploration of place (the Suffolk coast), a pilgrimage on foot in search of traces of events, people, and ways of life of the past, which merges real-life memories and documents with fiction. In addition to that, Sebald makes large

use of images that are reproduced in the text, uncaptioned, with a tantalizing effect for the reader.¹⁰

One of the first images the reader encounters is of the famous painting by Rembrandt *The Anatomy Lesson*, held in the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague. Sebald comes to it through a chain of associations that take him from his hospital bed in Norwich to seventeenth-century physician and thinker Sir Thomas Browne, who lived in Norwich and travelled to Leiden to study medicine, and might have been present at the public lecture by Dutch surgeon Nicolaas Tulp that Rembrandt depicted. These interconnections have the effect of telescoping the distance between these seemingly remote events and the narrative present. Rembrandt's use of perspective in this vast painting contributes to enhance the sense of proximity and participation:

Stehen wir heute im Mauritshuis vor dem gut zwei mal eineinhalb Meter messenden Anatomiegemälde Rembrandts, so stehen wir an der Stelle derer, die im Waagebouw seinerzeit dem Vorgang der Sezierung gefolgt sind, und meinen zu sehen, was diese gesehen haben. (23)

If we stand today in the Mauritshuis before the canvas, measuring over 1.5 by 1.5 meter, of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* we are standing precisely where those who were present at the dissection in the Waagebouw stood, and we believe that we see what they saw then. (Hulse 13; translation modified)

¹⁰ A growing body of literature concentrates on Sebald's use of images, especially photography. For an overview, see Long 46-70.

The body of an executed criminal known as Aris Kindt, stretched out on the dissection table, occupies center stage. Its greenish color, bloated chest, and inanimate face create a gruesomely realistic spectacle. The left forearm has been cut open to reveal its anatomical structure: using forceps, Dr Tulp pulls on the flexor muscles that make fingers curl, while demonstrating this same delicate movement with his own left hand. The structure and functions of the hand, and in particular gripping mechanisms, were connected to the tradition, dating back to Aristotle, that considered this complex instrument as proof the superiority accorded by God to humankind (Bruyn, Haak et al. 185). Sebald stresses how the anatomy lesson was a spectacle (“Schauspiel”) held in a large public hall, the Waagebouw, and attended by a paying audience. Its purported aim was to demonstrate the “*unerschrockener Forschungsdrang der neuen Wissenschaft*” (22; “undaunted investigative zeal of the new sciences,” Hulse 12). The anatomic accuracy of Rembrandt’s painting has been long debated, including by physicians, particularly as the dissected arm appears unnaturally twisted and larger than the right arm. Some critics accept the view that the arm was not observed from an actual body but copied from an anatomical illustration at a later stage (Bruyn, Haak et al. 186). For Sebald, this constitutes a deliberate act of sabotage. Rembrandt seemingly offers a faithful representation of the dead man’s body, but the obvious flaws of what should be the focal point of the image undermine the very notion of scientific knowledge and observation. He alone, Sebald says, is free of the “*starren cartesischen Blick*” (27; “rigid Cartesian gaze”) that render the surgeons blind to pain of their “victim.”

Sebald notes that, when looking at the canvas, we are under the impression of seeing what an eyewitness present at the scene would have seen. But is this really true? Indeed, Sebald claims that “*ist es fraglich, ob diesen Leib je in Wahrheit einer gesehen hat*” (22; “it is debatable whether anyone ever really saw that body,” Hulse 12). Strikingly, none of the men present, not even the anatomist himself, is looking directly at it. Most of them appear to be

concentrating on a large volume that lays open on the bottom right, which has been identified as an anatomical atlas (Heckscher 67-70). According to Sebald, Rembrandt wishes to suggest that these men of science are not as committed to the empirical method as they appear to be. Instead of observing reality, they prefer to rest their eyes on the textbook

...in dem die entsetzliche Körperlichkeit reduziert ist auf ein Diagramm, auf ein Schema des Menschen, wie es dem passionierten, an jenem Januarmorgen im Waaggebouw angeblich gleichfalls anwesenden Amateuranatomen René Descartes vorschwebte. (22)

...in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being, such as envisaged by the enthusiastic amateur anatomist René Descartes, who was also, so it is said, present that January morning in the Waaggebouw. (Hulse 12)

Francis Baker, whose analysis of the painting stands behind Sebald's interpretation, affirms that this dissolution of the corporeal into the textual is essentially a form of abuse. "With what philosophical serenity," he asks, "are these gazes able not to perceive the violent act of domination upon which this painting...predicates their tranquility?" (77-78).¹¹ Sebald speculates that Descartes himself might have been present at Tulp's anatomy lesson, along with Browne. But if Browne is Sebald's intellectual hero, Descartes becomes the straw-man representative of a kind of overarching Western metanarrative that over-rationalized the human being and devalued the body and emotions:

¹¹ Sebald's indebtedness to Barker in this respect has been demonstrated by Pic.

Bekanntlich lehrte Descartes in einem der Hauptkapitel der Geschichte der Unterwerfung, daß man absehen muß von dem unbegreiflichen Fleisch und hin auf die in uns bereits angelegte Maschine, auf das, was man vollkommen verstehen, restlos für die Arbeit nutzbar machen und, bei allfälliger Störung, entweder wieder instand setzen oder wegwerfen kann. (22)

In his philosophical investigations, which form one of the principal chapters of the history of subjection, Descartes teaches that one should disregard the flesh, and attend to the machine within, to what can fully be understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded. (Hulse, 13)

As often in contemporary philosophy, Descartes is vilified as the creator of a dualistic metaphysics that subjected nature to a heartless instrumental rationality and favored intellectual capacities over emotional ones.¹² In Sebald's interpretation, *The Anatomy Lesson* represents the contrast between the "Cartesian rigidity" of the surgeons' gaze, which bypasses the human, and the embodied, emotional gaze that Rembrandt's compassionate portrait solicits from the viewer. As has been noted, this reading owes much to Foucault's theories on the disciplinary effect of medical knowledge. However, as always in Sebald, the Foucauldian language of the passage should not be taken at face value. In his study of the "archival logic" of Sebald's writing, Long has concluded that "although he clearly found aspects of Foucault's descriptive analysis of power congenial...his literary work frequently

¹² On twentieth-century suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in Descartes' epistemology see Jay 69-82. Sorell puts forward a defense of Cartesianism that discriminates between Descartes' own writings and contemporary interpretations, which, he notes "are not always well founded" (x).

dramatises a certain excess of subjectivity that is not reducible to determination by disciplinarity and power/knowledge” (171).

That Sebald’s notion of subjectivity is not purely “anti-Cartesian” becomes clear when juxtaposing his analysis of *The Anatomy Lesson* with another ekphrastic moment. Later on in the book, the narrator remembers a trip to The Hague, where he had gone especially to see *The Anatomy Lesson*. He does not discuss that painting any further but talks at length of another, Jacob van Ruisdael’s *View of Haarlem*. Unlike the Rembrandt, which is reproduced twice, first in a double-page spread (14-15) and then cropped to detail overleaf, Sebald refrains from placing an image of Ruisdael’s painting in the text but provides a detailed description:

Die gegen Haarlem sich hinziehende Ebene ist aus der Höhe gesehen, von den Dünen aus, wie im allgemeinen behauptet wird, doch ist der Eindruck einer Schau aus der Vogelperspektive so stark, daß diese Seedünen ein richtiges Hügelland hätten sein müssen, wenn nicht gar ein kleines Gebirge. In Wahrheit ist van Ruisdael beim Malen natürlich nicht auf den Dünen gestanden, sondern auf einem künstlichen, ein Stück über der Welt imaginierten Punkt. Nur so konnte er alles zugleich sehen. (102)

The flatland stretching out towards Haarlem is seen from above, from a vantage point generally identified as the dunes, though the sense of a bird’s-eye view is so strong that the dunes would have to be veritable hills or even modest mountains. The truth of course is that Ruisdael did not take up a position on the dunes in order to paint; his vantage point was an imaginary position some distance above the earth. Only in this way could he see it all together. (Hulse, 83)

Once more the perspective of a painter is used to make a point about the relationship between seeing and knowing. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, reality is brought uncomfortably close to the observer: the level of characterization makes it impossible to view Aris Kindt's dead body merely as an anatomical sample, as "Cartesian perspectivalism" would demand.

By contrast, the Ruisdael painting lifts us out and away from the immediacy of the situation, enabling a broader perspective. The contours of the landscape, surmounted by majestic cloud formations, are in evidence, and the human figures are barely visible. The image, however, is not an unmediated representation of nature. A patch of sunlight illuminates carefully plotted fields where the linen is spread out to bleach. Bleaching was one of Haarlem's most important industries, and van Ruisdael shows the productive elements of the landscape in a harmonious interplay with the natural surroundings. Goethe, in his essay *Ruisdael the Poet*, praised him for his depictions of the "inhabited world" which "represent the past in the present," and create images that are both "pleasing to the eye and...expressing an idea" (210). Sebald might have Goethe's appraisal in mind when he sets Ruisdael's neat Dutch landscape in contrast to Rembrandt's troubling dissection.¹³

Anne Fuchs has cogently argued that the soothing power of Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem* allows the Sebaldian narrator to take "that decisive step which leads from the scientific concept of a fragmented nature," symbolized by Tulp's autopsy, "to an aesthetic experience of the unity of nature" ("Hauptkapitel" 129). This transition, however, is complicated by the consideration that there are no high hills or mountains around Haarlem, hence such a point of view cannot be real. Sebald leaves it at that, but the unspoken implication might be that all representations that release the viewer from involvement and offer an untroubled, open view of the world are, in a sense, illusory. Many see the trauma of the Holocaust as the subtext of many, if not all, of Sebald's works. As Fuchs puts it, "it is

¹³ It was David Ricks who brought Goethe's essay to my attention.

clear that Sebald...makes a connection between European rationalism and the emergence of a biopolitics that made Auschwitz possible" ("Painters" 173). Perhaps Sebald thinks that there is but a small step from cultivating critical distance to forgetting the humanity of others.

At other times, however, perspectival distance is presented as a cure for the terror that grips the narrator when confronted with "the traces of destruction" he detects even in the peaceful East Anglian countryside. In fact, the walking tour or "pilgrimage" that is related in *Die Ringe des Saturn* might have been the cause of the undefined illness that takes hold of the narrator at the start of the narrative, leaving him in a "state of almost total immobility" (Hulse 3). In a room on the eight floor of the hospital, he painfully drags himself to a window which "for some strange reason, was draped with black netting." A photograph of such a window is inserted into the narrative, and Sebald goes on to explain how looking out through it assuaged his anxiety that "the Suffolk expanses...had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot," and that reality itself had "vanished forever" (Hulse 4). The black netting has been variously interpreted as "a portent of death" (Cooke 158) or as a trap that imprisons the narrator (Blacker 169). But it can also be compared to a perspectival grid. Sebald's window resembles the figures used in Renaissance tracts to illustrate the essential elements of perspective, which "often represent an observer facing a wall or window laced with geometrical lines" (Elkins 9). And as Carol Jacobs has observed, it belongs to the same category as the Cartesian coordinate system of Rembrandt's painting and the lines of Browne's quincunx, which Sebald evokes in the same chapter (73).

If, as I argue, the black netting corresponds to the optical device for tracing perspectives, its prominent place at the beginning of the book might serve to clarify the epistemological premise on which Sebald constructs his novel-essay. By assuming the traditional position of the perspective painter who gazes at the world through a squared grid, Sebald makes an argument about the discriminating power of structured, distant vision. As

we are told, the total immersion in space and history gained through his perambulations has condemned the narrator to a form of paralysis. It is significant that the path to recovery and to writing begins with a taking of distance from the onslaught of impressions, and with the filtering of experience through a pre-formed, regular scheme symbolized by the netted window. But what does the window show? The familiar Norwich cityscape, seen from the vantage point of the hospital tower, appears to the narrator “an utterly alien place” devoid of life, akin to “a sea of stone or a field of rubble” (Hulse 5). Sebald acknowledges that this wider, more distanced perspective confirms what the ground-level investigation had already revealed: that the human world is but an expanse of ruins, the result of planned or natural destruction. For Andreas Huyssen, Sebald’s reticence to name the root cause or even distinguish between human actions and natural processes “remains too closely tied to metaphysics and to the apocalyptic philosophy of history so prominent in the German tradition” (156). But arguably Sebald’s multifaceted narrative is geared to avoid just that, by constantly shifting the point of view from a detached height which encompasses all things in an abstract spatio-temporal whole, to a troubling proximity to the fragments and memories of history’s ruins. Adopting a strategy comparable to that of Magris’ *Danube*, Sebald’s prose moves incessantly between close-ups and sovereign point of view, signaling the ambiguities underlying the intellectual and emotional investigation of the past, just as it refuses to settle for either resignation or mystification.

To conclude the triptych, I now turn to Orhan Pamuk’s homage to his native city in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. As Sebald and Magris, Pamuk is preoccupied with place and memory, and with finding a position from which to observe and narrate the past that is not subjected to the limitations of a static, totalizing perspective yet also free from the dangers of extreme relativism. Images are present in the text, but they have less of a mysterious aura than in *Die Ringe des Saturn*: authors and sources are duly credited in an

appendix at the end of the book. Pamuk's largely autobiographical account is an amalgam of memoir, literary reminiscences, and anecdotes of Istanbul history. Sebald's saturnine mood and Magris' nostalgia find a match in Pamuk's musings on the distinctive melancholy of Istanbul and its inhabitants, whom he represents as being caught between the fading Ottoman past and the borrowed clothes of Western modernity. "The great drive to Westernise," he writes, "amounted mostly to an erasure of the past" (27). Inspired by a mixture of self-loathing and ambition, the Republican elite to which Pamuk's own family belonged was keen to disentangle itself from memories of the fallen empire and caliphate, but continued to live among the remains of the wreckage, neglected yet haunting. The fragmentary survival of this unwanted past is symbolized by the bibelots and *alaturca* music filling the drawing room of the narrator's severe grandmother, and by features of the cityscape such as the ruined city walls, abandoned dervish lodges, traditional Ottoman wooden houses, and the impressive waterfront *yahıs*, once the residence of rich Pashas and now decrepit ruins falling prey to fires. These rotting structures confer on the city a characteristic "end-of-empire melancholy" that Pamuk has termed *hüzün*.

Erdag Göknar traces the origins of Pamuk's *hüzün* in "a trajectory from an external European gaze to an internal attempt at authenticity, which conceals/belies the internalized orientalism of Republican modernity" (231). Indeed, a big part of *Istanbul* is about seeing the city, and in particular about the gaze of Western travellers. Contrary to what might be expected, Pamuk does not reject the gaze of this overbearing "Other." Instead, he engages with Western representations and embraces the possibility they gave of complementing or reversing the autochthonous point of view. Midway through the book, the narrator feels the need to justify the comparative absence of Turkish authors from his densely intertextual narrative: "Why this fixation with the thoughts of Western travellers?," he wonders. By way of an answer, he talks ecstatically of his passion for writers such as Nerval, Flaubert, and the

Italian writer Edmondo de Amicis, explaining how he forged his own identity and image of Istanbul through their works.

Especially when reading the Western travellers of the nineteenth century – perhaps because they wrote about familiar things in words I could easily understand – I realise that “my city” is not really mine. Just as it is when I am contemplating the skyline from the angles most familiar to me – from Galata and Cihangir, where I am writing these lines – so it is, too, when I see the city through the words and images of Westerners who saw it before me. (261)

Comparing reading and writing to optical perspective, Pamuk describes the peculiar cognitive experience of holding different points of view simultaneously. The familiar is denaturalized in such a way that leads the reader (and the narrator himself) to interrogate the relationship between seeing and knowing, and between reality and its representation. The window is a typical device used in perspective treatises to illustrate *perspectiva naturalis*, that is, theories about how light affects the way the human eye sees (Elkins 46). Pamuk’s window, however, turns out to disrupt the illusion of transparency. Nothing would seem more local and particular than the view from one’s own room. Even so, the window frame does not impose “Cartesian coordinates” to the visual space nor does it relegate the observer to a fixed position. On the contrary, it provides an opportunity to escape such placement.

In a related passage at the beginning of the book, Pamuk warns the reader that he will not take advantage of the grammatical possibility of Turkish to distinguish between hearsay and what one has actually experienced by using different verbal tenses, as he believes such a distinction is irrelevant, or even impossible (8). In light of such remarks, *Istanbul* has often been interpreted as championing the view that there is no historical truth, but always a variety

of different, competing, but ultimately interchangeable points of view. Some critics have gone as far as denying that “there is a unified urban space called Istanbul” (Edwards and Graaulund, 180). But if we consider Pamuk’s statements about the influence of Western travellers, we will see that not all representations are the same, and that some have more explanatory power than others.

Chapter Seven of the book is entirely devoted to the painter and architect Antoine Ignace Melling, whose book of engravings with views of Constantinople is a source of constant fascination for the narrator. These engravings, we are told, are unique in that unlike other Western artists depicting Istanbul, Melling does not adopt an all-encompassing perspective that crushes the human figures, but gives a sense of horizontal movement, taking the viewer through a gradual process of discovery of the city’s complex geography. Deeply acquainted with Ottoman life, yet schooled in Western techniques of representation, Melling’s approach to Istanbul resonates with Pamuk’s own: “Melling’s is an insider’s point of view...Because he saw the city as an Istanbulu, but painted it like a clear-eyed Westerner, Melling’s Istanbul is not only a place graced by hills, mosques and landmarks we can recognise, but a place of sublime beauty” (67). Pamuk sees in Melling a kind of alter ego, a transitional figure between his particular East and the literary West, whose work combines local content with a foreign form. The experience of incongruity is not constructed in terms of a clash between European “modernity” and Turkish “backwardness,” nor explained away by a post-structuralist relativism that assumes that the real problem has to do with the inadequacies of the European perspective. Instead, that experience must ultimately be attributed to a constitutive paradox of the Turkish social order as Pamuk sees it: a project of modernization and national self-affirmation, conceived in imitation of the West, which alienates Turks from their own local reality and traditions. It is thus the fate of modern

Turkish culture to interpret its own reality with alien methodologies, and recognize itself in the “foreign air” of Melling’s engravings.

Recently, Dominick LaCapra, a historian whose work is heavily invested in ideas of identity and trauma, has raised questions about the role of participatory engagement in historical understanding, noting how unchecked identification can pose a barrier to careful enquiry and contextualization. As counterbalance, LaCapra proposes “an internally dialogized mode of discourse involving varying degrees of proximity and distance” (29). Pamuk’s narrative brings this internal dialogue from the level of intercultural, interpersonal relations down to the individual psyche. For the narrator-figure, European ideas are not just some inessential, abstract notions that are alien to the reality of Istanbul. Instead, they form an important part of his “local” identity, to the point that he claims: “whenever I sense the absence of Western eyes, I become my own Westerner” (260). What is truly Turkish, then, is neither the Ottoman heritage nor European modernity, but the distortion and manipulation of both, which is best represented through a fluid, shifting point of view.

Magris and his stories of the twisting Danube; the uncanny connections unveiled by Sebald’s narrator; and Pamuk’s double vision on Istanbul – they are easily read as enacting a confusion of self and other that defies understanding. Yet, as I hope to have shown, scepticism of pseudo-natural systems such as linear perspective in their case stops short of unchecked relativism. Through the ambiguous positioning of their viewers/narrators, Magris, Sebald and Pamuk question the myth of transparency and objectivity of positivist historiography. But even if they choose not to assign the viewer a single ideal place, their relentless search for the right standpoint from which the historical landscape can be reliably represented produces a kind of “comparative” objectivity. The peripatetic narratives of *Danube*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Istanbul* adopt perspectival representations as a figurative template for identifying and comparing the various intellectual standpoints from which the

past may be surveyed and explained. Without subscribing to either naïve realism or neo-skepticism, Magris, Sebald and Pamuk attempt to create a third path. What they propose is a dynamic approach that allows for multiple viewpoints while still grounding them within a stable frame of reference. By rejecting the disembodied, universal eye supposedly required by “classical” representation, they restore some of the flexibility that perspective had before the twentieth century fossilized it into a hyper-rational instrument of domination. Where competing viewpoints are allowed to interact in a meaningful dialogue, perspective becomes a way to democratize rather than centralize control. Momigliano’s ultimate line of defense against the postmodern brand of historicism was a shared ethical code or “moral conscience” which requires the historian to do research and to “do it well” (67). Following Momigliano, Carlo Ginzburg transfers authority from the inner forum of individual conscience to the sphere of public discourse. In *Thread and Traces*, Ginzburg remarks that “what has made perspective into such a powerful cognitive metaphor [is] the tension between subjective point of view and objective and verifiable truths...If this tension can only be kept open, the notion of perspective will cease to be a stumbling block...and become instead a space to meet – a square where we can converse, discuss, and disagree” (156). The problems attending perspective have not gone away. On the contrary, they have been brought out in the open.¹⁴

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